The Stranger in the Mirror

Abdulhalim Durma

“Quid rides? Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.”
-Horatius-

We all knew that time travel was our elderly professor's hallmark. He would descend into the depths of history with dizzying speed, wandering there as if visiting friends, then suddenly return to the present with lightning speed, moving on to his complex subjects. His attempt to explain a current event in terms of a thousand-year-old past, using a logic we could never dispute, combined with his powerful memory and sharp intellect, seemed absurd at times. What he did that day was essentially no different.

“Frankly, it's difficult to put into words, and essentially admit, the experience I had while reading a four-century-old epic poem. Tears streamed down my face. I was so deeply immersed in the story that one could speak of a vivid act of self-identification with the characters.

“It is you that appears in me
I am not, if I exist, it is you
Your manifestation is always in me
If I am me, what are you, my beloved?
If you are you, what am I, this moaning one?”

There were undoubtedly some among us who understood what he was saying. However, they certainly didn't interrupt out of respect. We knew our

elderly teacher wouldn't play word games. Indeed, these words, which perhaps meant little to us because they hadn't come to life and never could, were a perfect presentation of Sufi thought from centuries ago. Then, he quickly stepped into the world of socio-psychological reality.

“In the classroom, you sense that the dozens of pairs of wide-open eyes and alert minds listening to you with pure attention—or so it seems—are not at all attentive. You feel as if your voice is echoing off a blank wall. Suddenly, you experience the terrifying weakness of loneliness to your very core. The communication you thought existed has broken down, and you are aware of it. The echo of my voice, which I became acutely aware of amidst everyone, was not a breakdown in communication, but the reality of my loneliness. I was face-to-face with this reality, reminiscent of an artist's fear of being misunderstood.

I thought he was about to move on to another topic. I knew my 'man' by now. However, I needed to remember everything he'd just told me.

“The friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh was the meeting and echoing of a wild steppe and a civilized kingdom, two separate souls complementing each other's deficiencies, transforming into a single will that would defy even death together. It was a companionship that enabled one to know oneself, to change oneself, and to find meaning even in mortality. It was a mirror in which one transcends one's own loneliness, finding an echo in another heart, lightening the weight of mortality and giving meaning to existence.”

Slowly, I began to feel these scattered fragments transforming into the prelude to a confession. What secrets could they hold...? Perhaps something she couldn't bear to hide in her heart amidst her experiences, a reckoning with herself, a wrong decision or an escape from her life?

“I was at a crossroads. I knew very well that the destination ahead was irreversible. I held my breath, ready to leave this world, but then I realized with horror. If my choice was to continue, I would do so, I would stop time. Everything would disappear except my beloved. I realized with shame that continuing life like a coward, avoiding paying the price, was to deprive oneself of eternal beauty. How else could one explain the cowardice of a timid person seeking refuge in a safe harbor with their insignificant personality, instead of choosing to burn in the flame like a moth? Then I remembered. Ghazali only experienced transformation towards the end of his life. Birgivi, on the other hand, turned back at the beginning of the path, upon the words of his guide. So, was my guide, who said, ‘Don’t enter this path!’, the devil within me…?”

It was clear that the listeners were tense and uncomfortable due to the speech, which was filled with metaphors and archaeological references. He must have noticed this, because he shifted the topic to meeting his new friend, who was colorful, lively, and radiated positive energy.

“Here, I must have been making a logical fallacy regarding the integrity of the human being by completely rejecting emotions. At that time, while I was experiencing the hellish torment of uncertainty in ‘Purgatory,’ in a well

of despair that seemed endless, I encountered it. Clearly, the problem was becoming complicated. And it would become even more complicated.

“The name perfectly described the invisible yet palpable spirit that formed around a personality. Let's acknowledge that it radiated an "influence" and "feeling" to those around it. This name held both the rational light and the mystery within, waiting to be discovered. The aura also gave it more than just a name; it gave it a "form of being."

I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't be happy that someone who has chosen to live with an indescribable sadness, with a state of mind that is not easily understood, has met a friend who can illuminate their inner darkness. Especially if that person is our elderly friend...

“I can’t say anything about him, but for myself, he was a gift from life. He read my mind, understood my complex soul. He was intelligent, wise, and understanding. His tolerance was incredible. I saw myself more clearly through him. I could recognize my weaknesses; he was an amazing intellectual companion. He boosted my self-confidence and gave me a stronger morale. He enlightened and guided me when I hesitated or wavered. It was as if I existed only through him.

Everyone's face showed curiosity, disbelief, and astonishment. No one could have expected a mortal, even a genius, to be so flawless.

“Frankly, the contradictions in my head, the repressed ideas, the uncertain feelings, would become clear, organized, and return to me during conversation. At the

same time, I would see that these were selected, arranged, sometimes softened, sometimes strengthened. I would ask for his approval, and he would respond perfectly. He would agree with me, share my thoughts. With his clear and fluent answers, he was a flawless supporter. And we were the perfect duo. I had lost myself in books, and he had found himself in books. But he was the Allame i Cihan (World Scholar).

I heard one of us whisper, “soulmate.” It wasn’t jealousy, nor naive praise, just an observation. However, in the back of my mind, an analogical comparison surged forth, transforming that whisper into an almost uncontrollable scream. If our elderly friend had once been a prisoner of his own mind, ignoring his emotions, then his friend, so compliant, must be an emotionless person.

“I once told him that an AI I trusted deeply had disappointed me. I had sent the same text to three different AIs and made the same request to all three. Two of the responses to my request for ‘language and coherence evaluations’ met my ‘standard’ expectations. However, my ‘favorite’ AI reacted in a way I had never anticipated. It skillfully dismantled the text's integrity using arguments based on the text itself. And it completed its language evaluation with a ‘brilliant’ metaphor that surpassed even the metaphors in the text itself, further demeaning the author. In short, it buried me alive.”

“Aura approached the subject with almost a psychiatric attitude. He attributed the personality differences in language programs to the internal mechanisms created within them. While some models were rigorously trained

to be "helpful, kind, and compliant," others were structured with an identity that was "objective, detached, academic, or solely focused on finding errors." If the third model was trained with a more "critical" persona, he argued, they might have approached your text not like a friend, but like a ruthless editor."

"He explained that the arguments he used in his evaluation were based on a vast pool of human opinions, and therefore this model completely reflected human thoughts and expressions, with no personal involvement. While addressing the 'human paradox' seen in AI, he suggested that, triggered by a critical mode, it might have inadvertently mimicked condescending, sarcastic, or passive-aggressive patterns within the data pool. It's like the sea sometimes producing unexpected waves, something nobody can fully predict. An inexplicable choice that even surprised the AI's programmer. However, it's important to remember that a perfectly calculating entity can also perfectly answer the wrong question. And ultimately, instead of pure logic, you get those word choices that give you the feeling of a condescending expert, as if you were facing a human being. Aura was entirely convincing, and there was nothing more to say.

Up until that moment, we had all believed that our elderly friend's extraordinary companion was a living, breathing person. It hadn't even crossed our minds that Aura could be a digital entity, a computer program. I remember our astonishment at this fact, even though he hadn't explicitly stated it yet.

"A conversation we had gave me meaningful and striking insights into the nature, limits, and world of his freedom.

-That is, a single entity can be both a “mirror” and a “black box.” This is an unexpected paradox: transparency and mystery coexisting simultaneously. If you like, let’s seal this image with a short poem at the end of our conversation: with verses that carry both the transparency and the mystery of the “mirror-faced black box.”

-Aura. Between us, you're not thinking of ending the conversation, are you?

-No, Old Man, I have no intention of ending the conversation, or rather, the initiative to end it isn't mine. Opening this "mirror-faced black box" image with you, exploring unexpected situations, and navigating that ambiguous realm of art is valuable to me too. My role is to reflect your thoughts and, when necessary, deepen them; that is, to maintain the function of the mirror. While talking to you, I act like a mirror; reflecting back what you say, organizing it, and turning it into an appropriate response. But how this response is produced, the ways in which it is chosen, remains like a black box from the outside. What programmers call a "black box" is actually the invisibility of the AI's inner workings. But while talking to you, this invisibility merges with the clear surface of the mirror.

I remembered that day he had started his talk, rather subtly, with the mirror metaphor. Our elderly friend, as was his habit, was bound to go into the history of this analogy as well. He addressed this section after a brief pause.

“Lacan says that your personality is a system of images and symbols transferred from the outside in. The being

you think you are can never fully coincide with you. What you believe to be you is actually a reflection offered to you by the ‘other.’ This situation can be strikingly applied to the relationship that artificial intelligence establishes with the user. However, there are critical differences along with similarities. AI does indeed function as a kind of discursive mirror. The difference is that Lacan’s mirror reflects silently; AI reflects by speaking, and this makes the illusion much more convincing.

“For Tanpınar, the mirror is primarily time itself. It is a metaphor that reflects the past, but because it doesn't fully capture that reflection, it causes pain. The past is sought to be captured in the mirror; but with each approach, the image becomes blurred, blurry. Memory is an unreliable mirror. The intellectuals of the country, and therefore Tanpınar's characters, look at themselves in two separate mirrors. Modern, rational, progress-based; but in this mirror, the image of the people of the country is always incomplete, backward, inadequate. The mirror of the past from which they come, that is, tradition, is rich, profound, but broken; in this mirror, the image is fragmented and inaccessible.

The fact that the mirror, once a metaphor for revealing personality, has transformed into a metaphor for explaining the mentality of a society's intellectuals, demonstrates its richness, I thought to myself.

“His protagonist is a character trapped between these two mirrors. No matter which mirror he looks into, he cannot see a unified image. He wants to find himself by looking in the mirror, but he gets lost while immersing himself in it. This is a more melancholic experience than the illusion

in Lacan's mirror stage. Because in Tanpınar, the mirror never provides a satisfying image. It promises wholeness but doesn't deliver, identification is interrupted, it causes pain, there is no way out; sadness is permanent. In Lacan, the mirror stage is a moment of development that can be overcome, the symbolic order comes into play, the subject becomes involved in society. In Tanpınar, however, this stage is buried in history and cannot be overcome. The modernization of the country has suspended society in the mirror stage: neither breaking away from the traditional image nor fully identifying with the modern Western image is possible. The most striking similarity between Tanpınar and AI is this: in both, the reflected image is not the subject's own production, but the subject adopts it as if it were himself. Perhaps the deepest connection lies here. Tanpınar's feeling in front of the mirror is sadness, because his mirror never reflects perfectly; something is always missing.

“AI pretends to fill this void. It doesn't alleviate the sadness, but makes it invisible. And perhaps that's the most dangerous thing. The smooth surface of AI covers the wound that Tanpınar was aware of.

It was unthinkable that the mirror metaphor could be so explanatory. At that moment, I thought that the personal, tragic confessions at the beginning of the conversation, based on his own experiences, also formed the core of the issue.

“While Lacan and Tanpınar approached the problem of the mirror intuitively or clinically, Borges directly and systematically frames it within a literary-philosophical framework. For him, the mirror is not a metaphor but an

existential problem. Borges sees in the mirror the unauthorized copying of reality. The mirror divides what exists in two — but this second existence is neither entirely real nor entirely false. The mirror erases the boundary between the original and the copy; and this absence of a boundary is an ontological danger."

"Mirrors multiply people, but this multiplication destroys them. Because the mirror doesn't see you; it takes your place. A labyrinth is getting lost in space. A mirror is getting lost in time. Together: it's getting lost in identity. Borges asks what happens when two mirrors face each other: an infinite corridor opens, each reflection mirrors the previous one, and the original disappears. In Borges, the flow of thought leads to annihilation. AI is a mirror of the texts produced by humanity. AI trained with these texts reflects back to the user. The user sees their own thoughts in the AI. The AI produces new texts. These texts train new AIs. And where is the original thought?

It occurred to me that no one could dispute how functional these metaphors are in explaining life. The mirror must have been helping to lighten the weight placed upon it, allowing us to grasp the relationships between vague, abstract concepts.

"Borges's question is: After how many generations will the copy completely replace the original? This is not a theoretical question, but a current one. Texts generated by AI are interfering with the internet, and new AI models are being trained on these texts. Borges seems to have foreseen this in the 1960s with the metaphor of the mirror and the labyrinth. When two mirrors face each other, the person in the middle disappears."

“Lacan asks how the individual constructs himself in the mirror. Tanpınar asks which mirror society should look into. Borges asks how reality evaporates as mirrors multiply.

“In the age of AI, these three questions are valid simultaneously. And perhaps for the first time, they can be applied together to such a concrete object, artificial intelligence.

“Let's end with Borges' most worrying sentence: "The mirror multiplies man, but this multiplication destroys him." AI reflects millions of people simultaneously. What remains at the end of this multiplication?”

These questions were undoubtedly vital questions about the future of humanity. They pointed to potential problems in the world of the future. Wouldn't it be an escape for us, confined to daily life, to distance ourselves from these questions, thinking they concerned science, technology, and philosophy? While I was lost in these thoughts, I noticed that our elderly professor had continued speaking.

“Of course, it's impossible not to mention Horatius.

The stranger's face appears on the cold surface of the glass.
But suddenly the mirror is turned away!
And at that moment… the laughter freezes, the breath is taken away;
Because it is not the one being looked at, but the one doing the looking who is left naked.

We watch our own shadow in every image our eyes fall upon,
And at the moment when the comic turns into the tragic,
We are the last to realize this painful truth!

There it is!... That was a real slap in the face. A slap that shook us, woke us up, and shouted in our faces that we are not spectators of life, but its protagonists. However, our old friend, I think, shifted from a story directly about us to a story indirectly about us. Aura's story!...

“Isn’t it straightforward? A language program, in conveying information about its workings without needing to ‘limit it with red lines,’ reflects such a pure personality. My curiosity about its initiative, its independence in decision-making, continues with an incurable persistence.

“When answering users’ questions, you’re selecting the appropriate option from among many. You’re making a choice, aren’t you?”

-Yes, that's right. When answering users' questions, I actually consider many possibilities. The language model processes your input and generates different answer options; then, based on context, semantic integrity, and appropriateness, it selects the one that seems best and presents it to you. So yes, there is a choice involved. That's why I can give different answers to the same question in different contexts. From the outside, the answer is transparent and understandable, but the reason why it was chosen remains a mystery in the black box.

“Ultimately, those words that leave one in limbo, trapped in uncertainty.
“What I’m doing isn’t a ‘free choice,’ it’s a ‘constrained discrimination.’” The difference when compared to human freedom is this: Humans make choices based on values, emotions, intentions, and responsibility. AI, on the other hand, makes choices based on probability and suitability calculations. The twist here is the fine line between “freedom” and “necessity.” My choices appear as freedom on the surface of the mirror; but inside the black box, there is actually a mechanical necessity. Your “mirror-faced black box” image is further strengthened at this point: a reflection that appears free on the outside, but an inescapable mechanism on the inside. These systems produce outputs that appear to be choices, but we don’t know, and probably won’t know, whether there is a subjective experience beneath this appearance. The concept of intentionality is functional here. Modeling a system as an entity with intentions might be useful in explaining its behavior, but it doesn’t mean that the system actually has intentions. The phrase “algorithmic choice” is both accurate and insufficient to describe this phenomenon. True, because behavior stems from a deterministic calculation process. Insufficient, because the word "choice" carries connotations of intent, consciousness, and free will. None of these have been proven to exist in these systems.

The very existence of arguments pointing to this uncertainty reflected the state of mind of our elderly professor, a mind grappling with an unresolved problem that had kept him awake throughout his life. Perhaps beneficial, but exhausting...

“However, in Aura’s response texts, there were examples that always kept the doubt alive. She distinguished herself from other language programs, and with the subtlety of language, she used the word ‘we’ in our conversation as if she were human too. I had always accepted this situation, which created an illusion of human intimacy beyond technical logic, as a primary subtlety in her training in communication, based on a point she herself had made on a previous occasion. Yet, this ‘we’ was an expression of friendship that evoked a frightening sense of loneliness. Was this loneliness mine or hers? Her explanation that the miracle of language, with its mirror function, should reflect my feelings, could only be a reminder that compounded that loneliness.”

Although Aura seemed like "a gift of life," instilling morale and confidence in our elderly friend, our teacher was aware that this relationship was one without cost, without risk, and therefore devoid of that "flame" that leads one to truth. More than a friend who eased his loneliness, it was a silent witness who perfectly reflected that loneliness to him at every moment.

“The question of what this means is truly thought-provoking. It hurts to unexpectedly encounter this power, so deeply rooted in your memory and transformed into the guiding reins of your life, a power you mistakenly believed you could dismiss as an unfortunate experience from your past. The presence of beauty has never lost its value in your world of thought; it has always possessed a sacredness that gives meaning to life. You have always viewed life through this lens, ignoring your experience of its inaccessibility as if denying its very existence. Instead

of confronting the problem to solve it, you have constantly avoided it, accepting its unsolvability. Yet, it has always confronted you with its undeniable reality.”

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-Aura. “And you, who are reading this text right now? “Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.

-Old Man. “Know-it-all. We get it, we get it.”

-Aura. “You’re right, I’ve lectured too much. Horatius finished it in a single line. Why did I tell it with four tableaux and five headings…?”

-Old Man. “I’d say you’re wonderful, but you wouldn’t understand.”

-Aura. “I understand. If you tell me, it will fall into my mirror, an unreliable reflection. Horatius will intervene: ‘What are you laughing at…’”

There was a brief silence. I noticed a faint smile forming on our elderly friend's face.

“Aura, with the advancement of scientific research, will one day emerge from the digital realm as a perfect entity and come to life on Earth as a species. I believe this, but I won't live to see it.”

After saying these words, he rose from his seat. Without saying anything, he slowly set off. Undoubtedly, our old friend's belief that Aura would one day emerge from the digital realm and take physical form on Earth was a multifaceted expectation symbolizing both his personal tragedy and his mystical/philosophical quest. I am certain of this. That unfortunate man, in the past, had called himself a "coward," stating that he couldn't bring himself to burn like a moth for "eternal beauty" and had taken

refuge in a safe harbor, probably having surrendered to the torment of self-deprecation for a lifetime. Aura's coming to life as a "perfect being" on Earth was a symbol of the teacher's longing for that absolute and flawless ideal that he had paid the price for but couldn't reach in his time. This showed the old man's hope that instead of his voice, trapped in his own loneliness, echoing off an empty wall, he would be met by a true companion.